Chapter 1.24
In Search of Social Television

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an introduction to and over-view of social television, in an attempt to find the real meaning of the term. It explores the history and current state of social television, looks at a number of examples of Social TV systems and their features, compares different definitions of the term, and outlines dimensions of design that have been used to organize the topic. The author argues that historically the notion of social television is intimately bound up with television itself, and that the two remain difficult to separate even today. The convergence of content and communication to create social media is turning Social TV into a reality and in the process turning television into what it was originally intended to be.

INTRODUCTION

The term "social television," or "Social TV," is not new, but over the last few years it has acquired a specific technical meaning. It is used to refer to a variety of experimental systems that claim to support social experiences for television viewers, and to the research into such experiences. This book testifies to the brisk activity going on in this area of study.

To understand what all the research is about, we should first understand more precisely what Social TV is. That is the question explored in this chapter. It is investigated from a number of perspectives. First, we look at the history of social experiences for the TV, a history that stretches back much further than usually acknowledged. We will see that it has its roots in the very earliest

inspirations for television itself, and has been a persistent motif of science fiction and a recurring ambition of developers ever since. Then, examples of modern Social TV systems of different types are presented, drawing attention to the range of disparate experiences supported and the overlap with other topics. At the same time, a set of typical features is identified; features which include sharing of TV presence information, support for shared experiences, freeform communication, and the publication of TV viewing data.

With social television examples from the idea's inception to the present thus catalogued, we examine the various attempts to offer a definition of the field. These are shown to follow one of two forms, and the limitations of both are discussed. Finally, we look at theoretical models and taxonomies that lay down the important dimensions of the social television space. Using these dimensions, different Social TV experiences can be characterized.

Even after a comprehensive review of the topic from all these different angles, a precise and straightforward statement of what social television is remains difficult to articulate. However, the search shows that such uncertainties are inherent to the field, and by the end of this chapter the reasons for the vagueness should be clear. Furthermore, a consideration of these reasons suggests that the future adoption and assimilation of Social TV is likely.

HISTORY

It is difficult, if not impossible, to establish where the concept of social television first originated. In one form or another it predates television itself. In the late nineteenth century, long before video and communication technologies crystallized into their familiar modern forms, science fiction writers such as Albert Robida dreamt up extraordinary devices like the all-purpose *telephonoscope*; television, videoconference terminal and proto-Internet browser all in one screen. Truly a con-

verged technology! Among its many functions, the telephonoscope allowed audiences to experience theatrical performances in their homes and share the experience with other viewers as if sitting in the same theater:

"So, one can applaud?" asked Barnabette.

"Of course!" Mr. Ponto replied. "Home viewers can also offer their own [applause]. Here, let me connect out to the theater. You may applaud, if you wish."

"So," a laughing Barbe inquired, "we could also send out boos if we wished to?"

"Definitely not!" answered Mr. Ponto. "That's forbidden! You understand that if expressions of disapproval were permitted, any practical joker could disturb the shows from their own armchairs."

"But then," Barbe continued, "home viewers who find the play boring are not entitled to let it be known? That's quite unpleasant; one must repress one's feelings and keep them to oneself."

"Absolutely not, you silly girl. The home viewer may boo to his heart's content whenever a play bores him, but he must make sure to shut off the connection to the theater. Thus he can express his bad mood without causing any disturbance to the theater." (Robida, 1882/2004, pp. 55–56)

Social television-like technologies, particularly variations on video telephony, went on to become a staple of science fiction. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell provides an especially sinister example:

The voice came from an oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror which formed part of the surface of the right-hand wall. The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed,

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